Welcome to Spotlight. I’m Ryan Geertsma. And I’m Robin Basselin. Spotlight uses a special English method of broadcasting. It is easier for people to understand, no matter where in the world they live. Many desks fill a large school room in China. Hundreds of students sit near each other at these small tables. The students are writing quickly. They have been here for many hours. They are taking the Gaokao or “high level test”. Every June, nearly 10 million Chinese students take this important exam. It tests their knowledge after secondary school. The students’ scores will decide whether they get into university or not. Every year, students in many countries take exams like this. Today’s Spotlight is on standardized tests. School systems are different all around the world. But teachers everywhere have to test their students. They want to be sure that students have achieved a particular level of knowledge. Many places use standardized tests to determine students’ knowledge. These tests are the same for each person that takes them. Every person takes a standardized test using a similar process. And trained experts prepare the results. Many students take a major standardized test during or after secondary school. Many countries also give standardized tests to school children of all ages. Sometimes, even adults take standardized tests - like foreign language tests. But no matter what age a person is, taking these tests can be very stressful. So why do so many countries use standardized tests? Experts developed standardized tests to be able to record how well education systems worked. This kind of test gives school leaders useful information about how well students are doing. Schools also use tests to make sure that students have the knowledge they need. People say that a standardized test reduces the possibility of cheating. And there is also less chance of favouritism. Teachers cannot just give higher marks to the students they like. Standardized tests can also be a tool for teachers, parents and students. For example, in South Africa, people are very concerned about the quality of their educational system. A report in 2012 looked at 14 year old students in South Africa. The results showed that the students averaged only 13% in mathematics on their standardized test. These results made people across South Africa recognize that their schools were not producing the level of education they wanted. Standardized tests can help identify these kinds of problems with an educational system. But they can also help teachers, students and parents find the reasons for poor performance. One way standardized testing does this is by letting experts compare the results of different groups. For example, girls can be compared to boys. Or, students who have physical disabilities can be compared with able-bodied students. With this information, school leaders can better understand what is affecting their students. Then, they can make effective changes. However, there are some people who think that standardized testing is not good. They say that this kind of test does not consider many other things that affect students. Individual students each have different ways of learning. They also have different backgrounds and home situations. Mella Baxter has been a teacher in the United States for 20 years. She wrote on the website Take Part: Voice 3 “Standardized tests used alone are not the best evidence of performance. Some students are great thinkers, but poor test takers.” In the United States, school systems have begun to use more standardized testing than ever before. Many people thought that more testing would improve the school system. But this has not always happened. When standardized testing becomes too important, it can lower the quality of education. Teachers and students begin to concentrate only on passing the test. Students may not learn other important lessons that they need to learn for life. For example, some schools decrease break time so that students can study for testing. Or they may take away time for physical education or art. Experts in learning say that students need all these things to develop fully. Studying for tests may also decrease the time that students can be social. They may spend less time with friends and family members. In China, experts have noticed the same result. Lao Kaisheng is a professor in the education department of Beijing Normal University. He told The Guardian newspaper: Voice 4 "The education system here concentrates heavily on memorization. This is great for students' test-taking ability. But it does not develop their problem-solving and leadership abilities or their personal communication skills." China has also seen some negative effects from too much testing. They have seen that concentrating too much on testing is often not good for students. In 2013, the Ministry of Education in China wrote a report. The report said: “These problems of testing severely limit student development as a whole person. They stop the student’s healthy growth. And they limit opportunities to increase social responsibilities, creative spirit, and practical abilities in students.” Since the Ministry of Education released this report, the Chinese department has made some changes. Now, they are trying to measure students by more than just tests. They are also looking at other things such as moral development, health of the mind and body and development of interests and skills. The school leaders in China hope this will decrease the negative effects of standardized testing. China will still use the gaokao and other tests. But they will try to also look at other parts of the students’ growth and ability. Tests may be necessary for school systems. But individual students and families can also remember that there are many other important parts of learning. Ashwini Nene is from India. She took a standardized test called the Graduate Record Exam or GRE. She got a perfect result. But she says that the test is not the most important thing. Nene says her parents taught her the value of good relationships. She told Rediff.com news organization: Voice 6 "They encouraged me for my hard work. I am happy I could return their blessings. At the same time, I do not see this as a great achievement. It is just the beginning. I have a long way to go from here." What about you? Are standardized tests used where you live? What do you think about them? Tell us what you think. You can leave a comment on our website. Or email us at radio@radioenglish.net. You can also comment on Facebook at Facebook.com/spotlightradio. The writer of this program was Rena Dam. The producer was Mark Drenth. The voices you heard were from United States and the United Kingdom. All quotes were adapted for this program and voiced by Spotlight. You can listen to this program again, and read it, on the internet at www.radioenglish.net. This program is called, ‘Standardized Tests’. We hope you can join us again for the next Spotlight program. Goodbye.